

## *Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition*



Frank Montano was born in 1941 “in a two-room house in the woods” on the Red Cliff reservation, the homeland of his mother, Catherine LeMieux. His father, Joseph Montano, was a Mexican immigrant who had met and married Catherine in Milwaukee.

Frank moved to Milwaukee as a young boy, where his father worked in a factory and played in mariachi bands. Frank learned how to play the guitar and mandolin from his dad, with favorite genres including Tex-Mex (Tejano), Mexican polka, and songs of the revolution (corridos).

Frank expanded his repertoire to include country, folk and blues, composing some of his own songs and often playing in taverns.

In 1978, Frank moved back to Red Cliff where a friend gave him a cedar Woodland flute. The tones of the flute awakened in him a memory of hearing such sounds in the forest as a boy. He taught himself to play and make such flutes. This fulfilled something that Frank had felt had been missing in his life. Since then, Frank has played the traditional flute at home near Lake Superior and around the world.

Frank uses cedar, white pine or redwood to make Woodland flutes. He prefers soft woods because they produce a more mellow tone. Woodland flutes are fipple flutes, usually about two feet long, that have six evenly spaced and sized holes. For decoration, Frank sometimes carves a loon on the end of his flutes. He’s also made double flutes, in which both sides are played simultaneously, one providing the bass and the other the melody.

When Frank plays the Woodland flute, he finds a connection and communication with the spirits. “The higher notes are a song that’s created for the spirits, when the lower notes are a song that’s created for life that’s here. As you go through these songs, if it’s done the way it was intended, then you bring those spirits and those humans closer together, which creates what we call a healing.”

Frank’s most recent apprentice was Neil McClelland who made several flutes under Frank’s tutelage and learned the spiritual significance of the tradition. Frank estimates that he has taught about 200 people how to make flutes.

Frank uses the flute within his Ojibwe community and as a bridge across cultures. “What was told to me about the flute and the music is that it would help a lot of people, and help people to come together to understand each other, of all nations.”